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ABSTRACT

Stephen Tchudi, among others, argues that the distinction between expository writing and creative writing is finally a false distinction. Louise Rosenblatt explains that whether readers are reading creative writing or expository writing, they expect the experience of reading to provide them with both information and pleasure. A corollary of these arguments is that students learning to write essays about literature need to have an aesthetic purpose for writing as well as an informative one. The subjects of this experiment were college sophomore students taking a course in writing about literature. As part of a revision they were asked to make their essays more pleasing--more pleasing to the instructor. In other words, their revised essays were to include three specific features: a precise use of words, conspicuousness of ideas, and a balanced arrangement of ideas. To illustrate the aesthetic function of these features, the instructor used poetry and painting. Leaving certain words out of Robert Frost's "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things," the instructor passed out the poem and asked students to supply the missing words; later he compared their choices with Frost's more precise ones. Then, using a series of paintings including John Constable's "The Haywain" and Philip Evergood's "The Sunny Side of the Street," he illustrated the concepts of balance and focus. (TB)

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ED 381 790

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AESTHETICS IN WRITING ASSESSMENT, or A STUDENT'S ESSAY ABOUT A POEM IS ITSELF A WORK OF ART

Stephen Tchudi, among others, argues that the distinction between expository writing and creative writing is finally a false distinction, that all writing is creative, that all writing should be taught as creative writing. Richard Beach and James Marshall remind us that historically the essay is a literary genre, written for literary purposes. Louise Rosenblatt explains that readers often respond both efferently and aesthetically to any piece of writing; that is, whether they are reading creative writing or expository writing, they expect the experience of reading to provide them with both information and pleasure.

A corollary of these arguments is that students learning to write essays about literature need to have an aesthetic purpose for writing as well as an informative one. They need not only to explain a story or poem, but to please the reader of their explanations as they do so, because only then are they meeting the full range of the reader's expectations, especially of this literary genre.

I want to report this morning on my recent attempt to help students have an aesthetic purpose in their essays. I will describe first the methods and then the results.

The subjects of my experiment were students in a college sophomore course in writing about literature. They wrote typical assignments. They wrote journals, they wrote essays analyzing short stories, they explicated poems, they compared literary works, they wrote an analysis of a literary work that incorporated research. For the experiment, I asked them to choose one of their essays and revise it. As part of revision, I asked them to make the essays more pleasing. In explaining this, I was unabashedly subjective; that is, I told them that their essays had to please me, not anyone else, and the presence of three particular features in their revisions would please me greatly: a precise use of words, conspicuousness of their ideas, and the balanced arrangement of their ideas. That is, I wanted them both to consider their essays on a lexical level, and to consider the essays as an arranged whole, to break away from the sentence-level myopia that novice writers tend to have. And, to emphasize the aesthetic function of these features, when I demonstrated these features to the students, I used poetry and painting.

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To demonstrate a precise use of words, I used a cloze technique with a Robert Frost poem. The subject of the poem is that ageing and decay and destruction are as much part of natural cycles as birth and growth, and that feeling sad about such things is finally failing to understand natural cycles.

THE NEED OF BEING VERSED IN COUNTRY THINGS

The house had gone to bring again
To the midnight sky a sunset glow.
Now the chimney was all of the house that stood,
Like a _____ after the petals go.

The barn opposed across the way,
That would have joined the house in flame
Had it been the will of the wind, was left
To bear forsaken the place's name.

No more it opened with all one end
For teams that came by the stony road
To drum on the floor with scurrying hoofs
And brush the mow with the summer load.

The birds that came to it through the air
At broken windows flew out and in,
Their murmur more like the sigh we sigh
From too much _____ on what has been.

Yet for them the lilac renewed its leaf,
And the aged elm, though touched with fire;
And the dry pump flung up an awkward arm;
And the fence post carried a strand of wire.

For them there was really nothing sad.
But though they rejoiced in the nest they kept,
One had to be versed in country things
Not to believe the phoebes wept.

The students made several suggestions about what the missing words were. For the first blank, they suggested "flower" and "stem"; for the second blank, they suggested "thinking," "remembering," "brooding." Frost's words were "pistil" and "dwelling," and are more precise, more compact with meaning, than the words suggested. "Dwelling" is a pun that nicely connects the setting in the poem and our response to it. "Pistil" is a technical term from botany, the part of the flower that contains the ovules and that, after fertilzation, becomes the fruit. It states in a single word the idea of renewal and natural cycles, and alliterates with "petals" as well.

Next, I did the same exercise with sentences from a student essay about John Updike's short story "A & P," and then I asked the students, as part of their revising, to replace three words in their essays with words that were more precise, that expressed

their meaning more fully and that were more enjoyable.

I received two kinds of results.

1) A number of students made changes that were merely changes, that were not obviously more precise statements of their meaning; some changes were in fact less precise than the original words.

A. "These verbs at least put forth the possibility that the woman has become so absorbed in herself that her reflection is only a representation."

[Revision] "These verbs at least present the possibility that the woman has become so absorbed in herself that her reflection is only a representation."

B. "Having no experience to base her behavior upon, the mother makes mistakes which consequently will affect the child forever."

[Revision] "Having no experience to draw upon, the mother makes mistakes which consequently will affect the child forever."

2) But a number of students did employ more precise words.

C. "The poem [Sylvia Plath's "Mirror"] uses the image of a rising "terrible fish" in the final line to signify the woman's comprehension of what ageing can feel like."

[Revision] "The poem uses the image of a rising "terrible fish" in the final line to portray the woman's comprehension of what ageing can feel like."

D. "Although Emily [in Tillie Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing"] wasn't a difficult child, Emily's mother's hardships unfortunately affected Emily in the early stages of her life."

[Revision] "Although Emily [in Tillie Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing"] wasn't a difficult child, Emily's mother's hardships unfortunately wrinkled Emily in the early stages of her life."

That is, in revising, both of these students chose words that refer to the dominant imagery of the literary works they were analyzing.

To demonstrate what I mean by conspicuousness of ideas and the patterned arrangement of ideas, I showed students several paintings and explained something of what composition means in the visual arts.

One feature of visual composition is the difference between

foreground and background. I showed the students slides of John Constable's The Haywain and Philip Evergood's The Sunny Side of the Street, and asked them, "Where do your eyes go first? what are you immediately drawn to? where do you enter this picture? can you 'walk around' in it?" I explained to them that the main ideas or at least the main topics of their essays should be foregrounded, should be just as conspicuous to the reader as the foregrounded elements of these paintings.

The second feature of visual composition that I presented to them was that of balance, that paintings often have a focal point, a center of attention that our eyes are finally led to, and that paintings are balanced symmetrically or asymmetrically at that central point.. My examples were Peter Breughel's Wedding Dance for symmetrical balance, and Georges de la Tour's St. Joseph the Carpenter for asymmetrical balance. In Wedding Dance the people at the wedding are massed in three groups about the central figures (the pattern is that of a Mercedes Benz hood ornament). In St. Joseph the Carpenter, the focal point is at the side of the painting, the light and the child, the majority of the painting being taken up by shadow and the figure of St. Joseph.

We then looked at examples of student essays (found in Meyer's The Compact Bedford Introduction to Literature, 3rd edition), and I first asked the students to identify what is foregrounded. That is, when they skimmed the essays, what topics or concepts did they find made conspicuous by repetition and by position in thesis statements and topic sentences of paragraphs (a method of emphasis that experienced readers of such essays expect), and what words or ideas did they remember most easily.

Second, I asked them to identify the center of the essay, its physical center, to describe the topic of discussion there. At least in my experience, the center of a short student essay is the one place where the thesis is strongly supported, and the other paragraphs in the essay either lead up to this middle or ease away from it. I wanted the students to identify the center of their essays and then to see if it is consistent with the foregrounding.

Finally, I asked them to describe the balance of the essay as either symmetrical (Breughel) or asymmetrical (de la Tour). This was an attempt to help them see that essays have shape, form, and that often what gives readers pleasure (in addition to precision, clarity, and coherence) is following that development of that shape.

We discussed the example essays in detail. In "The A & P as a State of Mind," students agreed that the words foregrounded were "Sammy," "A & P," and "setting," and that the concept foregrounded was "conformity" (expressed also by "uniformity" and other synonyms). The physical center of the essay was the paragraph beginning, "As soon as Lengel sees the girls, the inevitable conflict begins." The essay's balance was asymmetrical. That is, of the five paragraphs of the essay, three paragraphs were on

setting (the store, the town, Lengel as part of setting), but the final paragraph was on Sammy's decision to quit his job.

In "A Reading of Emily Dickinson's 'There's a Certain Slant of Light,'" students agreed that the words foregrounded were "Dickinson," "speaker," "light," "death," and that the concept foregrounded was "oppression." The physical center of the essay was the third paragraph (out of five), the explanation that the topic of the poem is the depression caused by death. The essay's balance was symmetrical; each paragraph explains what a different aspect of the poem tells us about the speaker.

I then asked students, as part of the revision assignment, to write a memo describing their essays in terms of foreground and balance. This first memo is typical of the responses I received. Its statements about the essay are accurate, but brief and general, and writing the memo did not in any obvious way change the student's thinking about her essay.

First Memo:

"1. What is the foreground in the essay?
The imagery of how the father reacts to the fires and how these reactions affect the family. Also the sound of the fire engines and how they go through the silent streets in the middle of the night. And how the father gets so excited when he hears the calls of the fire engines.

2. Identify the middle of the essay.
The middle of the essay is when the second stanza is discussed and the joy the father takes out of the fire when it is the home of a wealthy family.
Is it consistent with the thesis?
Yes it is consistent with the thesis of the way the father shows the joy and happiness he takes out of the fires.

3. What is the principal arrangement?
Symmetrical, the basic principle of the paper is the father and how he reacts to the fires and they excite him."

The next memo was the most productive response I received.

Second Memo:

"Reading through my essay once again, I believe that Emily's expectations of herself and the events that assisted in shaping those expectations is the concept that is foregrounded in my essay. The Depression, the war, and her mother's lack of knowledge about raising children help to shape Emily's self-concept, and I believe that this point is what is most noticeable throughout the essay and what stands out.

The middle seems to occur on the third page with the statement, "All of these instances lead to Emily's developing self-concepts and her perceptions of her worth." This is the main argument and seems to be the natural median between the events that effected Emily's values of herself and how she had turned out as an adult. The middle seems to support the thesis that was stated in the beginning paragraph.

The statement seems to be fairly symmetrical. There is a build up of events that help to shape who Emily becomes, and then there is a definite middle where I talk about how Emily is as an adult. It seems to be kind of an upside-down "V." However, I do believe that the paragraph pertaining to her venture in comedy seems to make the essay somewhat off-balance, so I am not sure if it is either symmetrical or asymmetrical."

In this memo the student discusses her essay accurately and in detail, and she shows an awareness of pattern, of the shape of the whole argument, that was exactly what I had hoped to see.

When I began this presentation I said that my motive was to change students' sense of purpose in writing essays, that I wanted them not only to inform readers, but to please readers as well. To be more direct about this, my motive was selfish. I turn to the reading of poems, novels, works of literary scholarship, willingly, because I know that there is the possibility that it will be enjoyable, that I will be fully engaged as a reader. I would like to approach a collection of student essays with the same expectation. I do not do so now. But I believe that, by and large, when students write, they accomplish the goals that they set for themselves, and so, if I can help them change their goals to include an aesthetic one, both they and I can be pleased.